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Memoir Writing from Diary to Publishable Piece

by Jeff Rasley

Most writers have kept a journal or diary during some period in their lives. I started a diary when I was sixteen. After two weeks burned the document out of fear my parents might find it — too much incriminating evidence. I didn't take up journal writing again until I hitchhiked from Indiana to Florida and then to New Orleans for Mardi Gras at age 18.

For a small town Hoosier kid, some of the characters I met on the road amazed and moved me. There was the back woods Tennessean couple who lived off shooting squirrels and rabbits. Their car was a rim racking old Chevy with the seats torn out so we sat on bare metal. They picked me up because they needed gas money. We had a good ride and conversation on the \$3 I could spare. And there was the night I spent at the house of the daughter of the Town Constable of Pleasureville, KY.

Anyway, my first great adventure on my own moved me to keep a journal. As my appetite for adventure travel increased and took me to even more exotic places than Pleasureville, KY, I thought others might find some benefit in reading what I learned from the adventures. But, real meaning would not come through a mere recording of events. The serious memoir writer must interpret meaning from one's own experiences, but meaning beyond the immediacy of the moment. I would record in my journal the facts of a travel experience and my reaction to it. To turn the journal writing into a worthy article or book there had to be an insight, lesson or wisdom which I could offer to others.

Creating an article worthy of publication meant going beyond mere biographical journaling. Journaling for one's own pleasure, or to pass on to family and heirs, of course has value. And social media has created the opportunity to bore the hell out of friends by posting the quotidian details of one's life. ["Here I am enjoying my first copy of coffee of the day looking out my window and a blue bird landed on the sill, blah, blah, etc."]

The personal essays I have been inspired to write are mostly about extreme experiences such as Himalayan mountain climbing or solo sea-kayaking. I have learned important lessons about life from these adventures. For example, I was inspired to write about the strength and beauty of the human spirit and the willingness to be self-sacrificial after witnessing a Nepalese guide and porter risk their lives to save and care for others who had been trapped by an avalanche.

After twenty years of article writing I had accumulated enough material and confidence to risk a book. I was lucky. I sent it unsolicited to a publisher without representation and a contract for, and publication of, *Bringing Progress to Paradise* was the result.

Other writers have found meaning worthy of publication in more mundane experiences. A friend writes about topics of interest to homeowners, parents and a general readership. One of her published articles is a delightfully humorous essay about the different approaches her and a neighbor applied to dealing with a resident groundhog. Its wider application for animal lovers is how to deal with what some consider pests and others consider lovable critters.

Essential to making a memoir interesting and worthy of publication is to have a central theme that carries the narrative forward. Without a thematic narrative, we are back to mere observation or a random collection of insights without a guiding light. The narrative must include factual details to make it interesting. A point made in the abstract is likely to be forgotten as soon as the reading device is turned off.

As to publication, well, much has changed since I first began writing for publication in the 1980s. I used to go to my neighborhood library and page through Writers' Market looking for the magazines or journals interested in publishing the type of article I had written. Now, the neighborhood library has probably closed. Information about publishers is online, but many of the print publications have ceased to exist or been downsized. However, the advent of the digital age and online publishing has created vastly more opportunities for publication than ever before.

Greater opportunity for publication of articles through blogs and books through direct publishing is a wonderful development for writers. The one downside of the traditional publishing industry's bankruptcy is the loss of secure pay for the published writer. For several decades a writer could expect to be paid from \$100 to \$2,500, depending on the publication's prestige and circulation. Guest blogging (thanks Indies Unlimited!) did not exist in pre-digital history. Unfortunately, the writing is often done gratis (damn!).

Jeff Rasley is author of *MONSTERS OF THE MIDWAY: The Worst Team in College Football?*; *Light in the Mountains — A Hoosier Quaker finds Communal Enlightenment in Nepal*; *Islands in My Dreams*; *Nepal Himalayas — in the Moment*; *False Prophet?* and *Bringing Progress to Paradise*. Rasley has published numerous articles and photos in academic and mainstream periodicals including *Newsweek*, *Chicago Magazine*, *ABA Journal*, *Family Law Review*, *Pacific Magazine*, *Indy's Child*, *The Journal of Communal Societies*, *The Chrysalis Reader*, *Faith & Fitness Magazine*, *Friends Journal* and *Real Travel Adventures International Magazine*. You can learn more about Jeff at his [website](#) and his Amazon.com [Author Page](#).